# A Changing use of Space

History of the Museum Building at St. Paul's

Changes in utilization of public space helps us understand shifting priorities and needs of succeeding generations, as reflected in the 180-year history of the buildings that have occupied the current setting of the museum at St. Paul's Church National Historic Site

In the mid 1830s, a wooden horse shed was constructed on the site adjacent to the stone and brick church. While parishioners had traveled to services on horse-drawn carriages since the 18th century, the erection of the barn indicated the improved fortunes of the parish, especially the benevolence of one wealthy congregant. George Rapelje, who also purchased the Erben pipe organ at the time, donated lumber for the shed, which was assembled by local laborers. Wealthy merchants and builders, the Rapeljes lived near the church in what is today the northern Bronx.

Still a modest parish, St. Paul's served perhaps 90 parishioners, but it remained the only church in the rural, dispersed Town of Eastchester, about 20 miles north of New York City and many congregants arrived on horse drawn carriage. Measuring about 60' x 40', the rectangular shed was assembled using a common post and beam design, with swinging doors opening for animals and vehicles on the side closest to the church. While difficult to perceive, a corner of the shed peeks out at the lower left edge of a glass plate negative photo of the village green and St. Paul's in the 1860s.

Construction of the shelter also represented available room on a spacious village green, which actually belonged to the town, and suggested the continued symbiotic relationship between the municipality and St. Paul's, a tradition extending to colonial times when parish and Eastchester were formally linked. To accommodate the spiritual and social needs of parishioners who traveled to the church on the chief transportation mode of the day, the town and parish pledged a substantial piece of real estate to the shed. As families retrieved their carriages, we can imagine the conversations that occurred here -- weather, agricultural crops, local politics, news of parishioners serving with the Union armies in the Civil War, the assassination of President Lincoln.

In 1888, the improved economic fortunes of the parish, especially one generous widow (Martha Wilson), led to the replacement of the horse shed with a masonry carriage house. This initiative overlapped with celebration of the 100th anniversary of the first post Revolutionary War service in the church. The stronger facility could accommodate large parish events, including a multi-course banquet commemorating the centennial, when the masonry shelter was "converted into a temporary dining hall before being turned over to its equine occupants," according to a New York Times account.

In the design of the masonry carriage house, or hitching shed, as contemporaries called it, we distinguish the outlines of the building we know today -- a rectangular structure, with a large arched opening at the front, or western side for the vehicles, and eight vaulted windows on the north side. The image represented here shows the dismantling of portions of the masonry shed to facilitate the construction of the new parish hall in 1925.

This conversion emerged from the eclipsing of horse drawn wagons through the triumph of the automobile. A seismic shift in transportation, this historical development overlapped with the shrinking in size and fortunes of the St. Paul's congregation, causing some parishioners to resist the parish hall project as poorly timed and too ambitious. While original building costs were budgeted at $8,000, the final expenditure was $20,000, or about $250,000 today, mostly covered through bank loans, which were not satisfied until the 1940s. Church records report several families left St. Paul's because of their strong opposition to the erection of the parish hall, although clearly enough congregants realized that the carriage house was an anachronism and a different utilization of the space was warranted.

A new roof was installed and powerful cross beams were bolted together to provide stability. Metal rings which apparently facilitated the hitching post on the north wall were retained, and are visible today. A sizable brick hearth was carved into the south wall for heat. Cleared of the horses, the new parish hall proved to be quite elastic, accommodating an impressive variety of church and community activities over the next 55 years. Regular uses were fellowship on Sunday following worship, Sunday school and office space for the minister, but the facility additionally served occasional, variable recreational, ceremonial and even housing needs of the parish. In 1941-2, during extensive restoration work in the church sanctuary,

religious worship and baptisms were held in the hall; strawberries were consumed at the church's annual June fair. Governor Franklin Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor dined at a banquet there following the Descendant's Day event June 14, 1931. Oral tradition reports young men hoisting two-handed basketball shots in the 1950s and 60s, and learning the martial arts. Driven inside by rain, drum and fife corps marched on the parish hall floor while practicing for the Bicentennial in 1976. The post World War II housing crisis, created by the return of millions of soldiers to civilian life, led the minister to establish temporary living quarters for his trusted secretary and her husband, a returning veteran, in February 1946. The Diocese permitted other people to reside in the building during the waning days of the parish in the 1970s.

**Thomas and Adeline Vitkowski, living in the parish hall, 1946.**

The contemporary use of the structure as a visitors' center and museum developed through the advent of St. Paul's Church National Historic Site, the successor to the church on the six acre plot in Mt. Vernon. That innovation generated a requirement for exhibitions exploring topics in the site's history, welcoming visitors, displaying multimedia, sponsoring talks on history and work space for staff. An oak floor was installed in the 1980s, along with museum partitions and overhead lighting for modern displays, while an extension at the rear, or eastern end, stored maintenance equipment. It's a long way from the wooden hitching shed of the 1830s, and it might be interesting to speculate on the utilization on the building 100 years from now.